

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 222 090

FL 013 273

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TITLE Teaching Selective Listening Strategies for Comprehension and Acquisition.
PUB DATE 82
NOTE 23p.; Expanded version of a paper presented at the Annual Convention of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (16th, Honolulu, HI, May 1-6, 1982).
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Basic Skills; *Class Activities; *English (Second Language); *Language Processing; Language Research; Learning Processes; *Listening Comprehension; Non English Speaking; Postsecondary Education; *Second Language Instruction; Skill Development; Student Needs; Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

Adult English as a second language (ESL) students must develop listening comprehension skill for two reasons: they need it for survival purposes immediately and it is the first step toward acquisition of English. These two needs reflect the distinction between listening for comprehension and listening for acquisition: they must be accounted for in the curriculum, materials, and teaching methods of ESL classes. Research has described the listening process as one of predicting, sampling, hypothesis-creating, and checking. By explaining these strategies, focusing on them separately and sequentially at first, and teaching ways to control them, the instructor can lead students to become more self-confident and independent in their listening abilities and to comprehend real language messages before they actually acquire comparable knowledge of the target language. Extending these techniques to the second type of comprehension would mean a change in the focus of traditional types of exercises. Through the use of the listening strategies described above, the exercises would focus first on understanding the message and then on the language forms. Strategies and techniques based on the model are described and sample exercises are appended. (AMH)

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"Teaching Selective Listening Strategies for Comprehension and Acquisition" *

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This paper presents dual purposes for developing listening ability in ESL instructional programs in English-speaking programs. Second language acquisition research is cited which indicates that comprehension should be developed first as a precursor for language acquisition and as an essential tool for accomplishing survival tasks in the new country. Selective listening strategies based on a model of the listening process (predicting, sampling, hypothesis-creating and checking) are put forth as a means to improve ESL students' abilities to comprehend natural spoken discourse. Implications of teaching listening for comprehension of the message as opposed to teaching listening for acquisition of the language with respect to materials and methodology are discussed and examples of exercises are provided.

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*This is a revised and expanded version of a paper entitled "The Listening Process: Implications for Teaching Selective Listening Strategies" presented at the 1982 Tesol Convention, Honolulu, Hawaii.

Much of the current research in second language acquisition is pointing toward the primacy of comprehension in language instructional programs. Krashen (1981) postulates that language acquisition develops from "intake": those features of the language which the learner absorbs from a message ("input") that is both meaningful and understood. Winitz (1981) has published a compilation of articles by well-known theorists on the comprehension approach to language instruction. These authors would ^{also} agree that acquisition of L2 features depends first on comprehension of the input. Subsequently, language acquisition may occur if the level of the language features in the message is at or slightly beyond the level of the learner. Hence it would seem that comprehension should have a central place in any program which claims to promote L2 acquisition.

A strong case for developing listening comprehension as a first step towards language acquisition in foreign and second language programs has been made by Krashen, Winitz, and others.¹

¹See also Postovsky (1981) and Nord (1981).

However, students who are living in the country of the language they are learning have an additional purpose for listening: day-to-day comprehension for survival outside of the classroom. They cannot wait to acquire a good deal of the language before they have to begin functioning. From the very beginning, they need to be able to understand messages that are beyond their level of acquired language. They need to comprehend in order to

actually do something: find an apartment, get a phone, sign forms, follow instructions, and so on.

Therefore, in an optimally effective program of language instruction in the L2 country, we should focus on developing listening comprehension for two purposes: (1) for understanding survival messages in natural spoken language, and (2) as a first step toward acquisition of the target language. This distinction between listening for comprehension and listening for acquisition is an important one because it has implications for the kind of discourse we choose to use in our curricula (natural and authentic vs. simplified and scripted discourse) and for the kinds of exercises we use. In this paper, I will describe strategies for developing listening comprehension for these two purposes for English as a second language (ESL) students. I will then discuss types of materials and methodologies that are appropriate for each purpose. First, let us examine how we might foster the first goal: to help our students comprehend survival messages in natural spoken English.

In the field of ESL, many listening textbooks have recently been published which use natural English on their tapes.²

²Some examples are Listening In and Speaking Out by James, Whitley, and Bode (1981), Interview by Cornelius (1981), and What a Story! and Have You Heard? by Underwood (1976, 1979).

At the same time, more and more ESL teachers have been developing their own authentic listening materials using TV and radio

programs and other native English speakers as sources. However, while we have changed the kind of discourse we are presenting to our students in class, our approach to teaching listening has remained largely the same. We continue to present a text for students to listen to, we have them listen to the tape and answer questions, and then we check for correct answers. We are testing comprehension, not developing it. Our concession to the use of natural discourse has been to let the students hear the tape as often as they need to. We rely on extended exposure to the natural language to improve their listening comprehension abilities. But while it is undoubtedly desirable to give our students more exposure to natural spoken English, it is not enough.³

³Postovsky (1981:175), Nord (1981: 73), and Newmark(1981: 36) explain that mere exposure to natural language does not aid comprehension or L2 acquisition, because it does not ensure that the input is meaningful to or understood by the learner.

Teachers who have tried to use their own tapes of TV and radio broadcasts have often met with frustration on the part of their students, who cannot understand what is being said, no matter how many times they hear it. In order to understand natural English and to alleviate the frustration that results from mere repeated exposure to it, ESL students need to be guided toward the use of effective listening strategies.⁴

⁴Some of the texts cited in footnote 2 attempt to develop listening strategies implicitly. Unfortunately, many teachers

who are unfamiliar with the listening process are unable to maximize the effectiveness of these listening texts.

What kinds of listening strategies would be most effective for ESL students? In comprehending a natural spoken message that is most likely beyond the ESL learner's competence, the learner/listener must be able to pick out the important, relevant information for her needs. She doesn't need to understand every word of the discourse, only the "most important" ones, according to her purpose for listening. She must be able to listen selectively, to pick out the essential information in what she has heard and use that along with other information she already has to construct a good idea of the meaning of the message without attending to and understanding every word.

This kind of approach to listening in the second language is different from what most of our students expect. They come to us believing that in their own language, they actually attend to every word that is said. This notion about listening is reinforced by the intensive listening exercises (e.g. dictations) we often use which require students to understand every word they hear. In addition, since their primary goal is to learn the language, they worry that if they don't understand all the words, they won't learn English. Therefore, it is important for the teacher to differentiate the two purposes for listening and to emphasize that by learning to understand first, they will be able to learn the language more efficiently. The key to learning to understand is selective listening strategies. The next section

of this paper will describe some selective listening strategies which are based on a current model of the listening process.

Listening for comprehension: the listening process

The listening process has been described by cognitive psychologists and applied linguists (Neisser (1967), Tarone (1974), and Brown (1977, 1978)) as an active, constructive process of (1) predicting the content of a message - using background knowledge of the topic or situation to guess what might be said, (2) sampling the discourse - choosing important, relevant bits of information from the incoming stream of speech, (3) constructing a hypothesis about the content of the message based on the predictions and sampled cues, and (4) checking the hypothesis against knowledge from the predicting and sampling stages to see if it is a "reasonable interpretation" (Brown, 1978:280) of the data at hand. If it is reasonable, the listener continues to predict and sample the next part of the message. If it is not, the listener must backtrack and revise the hypothesis, by checking the sampled cues and sampling some more for additional cues.⁵

⁵ ^{this model of} I have described/the listening process briefly in order to make it most accessible to the teachers who will be using it. For a more detailed account of the listening process, see also Nord (1981) and Rost (1982).

It is important to remember that this is not a linear process of discrete stages. Sampling, predicting, creating, and testing hypotheses are all happening simultaneously.

Because of the speed of delivery of the spoken message, the ability to hold pieces of information in short term memory and the ability to chunk information manageably become very important. If we isolate these stages in our ESL listening classes, we are making the process somewhat artificial and unrealistic. However, I believe it is necessary because it allows students to get a handle on some very amorphous skills. By focusing on these stages separately and sequentially at first, and ^{by} teaching students strategies to control them better, we can show students that they really do not need to understand every word they hear in order to understand the message. They become more self-confident and independent in their listening abilities because they look to themselves to see if their understanding is "reasonable" instead of looking to the teacher to see if they are "correct."

Implications for classroom methodology and materials

In order to teach students to comprehend real language messages, we should break down the listening process into a series of sequential stages, focusing on each one in turn, but always within the context of the whole process. In other words, in any given lesson, one of the stages of the process might be focused on, but during the lesson, the student would go through each stage of the process. The material on the tape should be authentic discourse and a type of necessary situation that a student living in an English-speaking country would need to cope with, to make it relevant to the student. Some examples of necessary situations are getting information on applying to universities, buying a car, making phone calls,

social/phatic conversation, academic lectures. Classroom methodology would differ from the traditional in that the teacher would first set the stage for the tape and attempt to lead students to predict what they would expect to hear in that type of situation. Before listening to a tape, students should have all of the information they would normally have if they were in that situation. For example, if a student were making a phone call, he would already know whom he was calling and why and the information he would be listening for. In making their predictions, students should be encouraged, through leading questions if necessary, to use all the information at their disposal: their knowledge of the world, their prior knowledge of the situation or topic⁶ and their familiarity

⁶ This often depends on their knowledge of the target culture. This is why it is both difficult for them to anticipate and essential for them to begin learning about the culture as well as the language.

with the speaker. These predictions form a preliminary hypothesis about the content of the message.

After making their hypothesis, students are asked to listen to the tape to see if it was accurate. During this stage of the listening process, students are implicitly being led to sample, because they are listening to a natural discourse, at normal speed with all the elisions and assimilations of natural speech, and so they are unable to understand every word. They are encouraged not to worry if they cannot understand everything -

they are not expected to. Their task is to see if their predictions were right. Specific exercises to develop students' abilities to sample are necessary, however, and will be presented and discussed later in this paper.

After listening, teacher and students discuss whether their prior predictions were correct or not. At this point, some of the students in the class will often disagree. They cite their sampled cues to support what they believe the message is. The teacher writes their cited cues on the board and asks questions to lead the students to decide if the various interpretations of the message are reasonable or not - do they make sense? When the interpretations do not make sense or students still disagree, they go back and listen to the tape again, focusing on the areas of disagreement and trying to sample more relevant cues. Then they check their hypothesis once more against the new sampled cues and usually are able to settle on the correct meaning of the message.

Two questions may arise at this point. The first is whether to teach these strategies explicitly or implicitly. I have found that it is helpful to explain something about the listening process to students, to make them more aware of how they listen in their own language and how they can learn to listen more effectively in English. Explicit discussion of listening strategies like predicting before listening and learning to pick out important words (sampling) helps students realize they are learning and practicing skills which they really can use to improve their listening abilities.

The second question is what to do if students still do not understand the message accurately after sampling again. It is sometimes very difficult for us as teachers to let students leave a lesson without having understood the tape completely. However, we are also trying to build up a sense of confidence in their own abilities to evaluate their hypotheses for reasonableness and probability. If students have used their sampled cues and prior knowledge to arrive at a reasonable interpretation of the data, they should be allowed to leave it at that, as indeed a native speaker would. As they go through the course, their abilities to evaluate will improve, as will their abilities to predict and sample, and their interpretations will become more accurate.

As mentioned above, specific exercises can be used to develop sampling techniques. Sampling enables the listener to pick out from the discourse the most important and meaningful cues, ^{from both} important/ the speaker's and listener's points of view. Sampling is aided by the speaker's use of suprasegmental phonological features, especially word stress, to indicate important words. Sampling can also be done through a more global analysis of the structure of the discourse. If a professor says that he will talk about the 3 causes of X, in the day's lecture, the listener's attention will be drawn to those three items. Other information in the lecture will not be attended to as closely because it will seem to be off the topic, as stated by the professor. Sampling is also influenced by the listener's prior knowledge and the information one wants

to find out. If you and I both listen to the same news broadcast, we will probably come away from it remembering different information, because we wanted to know different things.

Let's examine more closely how sampling depends on the ability to recognize stressed words in a discourse. We know that in an English utterance, there is an alternation between stressed and unstressed syllables and that the stressed syllables tend to occur at fairly regular intervals. This causes the unstressed syllables to be reduced, obscured, or even totally obliterated in the speaker's attempt to fit them in between the stressed syllables. We also know that content, information-carrying words are usually stressed and that unstressed words usually carry less meaningful information. As native speakers of English, we intuitively know how stress signals important information and we key in on those words as we listen - we sample them - and we don't attend as much to the words that are unstressed.

ESL learners, however, are usually unaware of how stress functions in English. So our goal in these sampling exercises is to help them to develop a sensitivity to stress and an understanding of how it is used to signal important information.

How do we recognize stress? Stressed syllables are usually described as being louder, longer, and pronounced at a higher pitch than unstressed syllables. These features are interrelated although experiments show that native English speakers recognize pitch prominence first and then duration, while they do not seem to use loudness as a factor in stress recognition. (Brazil, Coulthard, and Johns, 1980:4) For our purposes in developing sensitivity

to stress in our students, it does not seem profitable to try to isolate these characteristics. We hope that they will be able to identify one or a combination of them.

We might also note that stressed syllables are more clearly articulated than unstressed syllables and therefore if a speaker deems something to be important, she will articulate it clearly. If the speaker does not consider it important for the listener to understand, she will not articulate it as carefully, and the listener is not expected to pick up on it. By calling our students' attention to how stress functions in English, we can also allay some of their frustration with nonclearly articulated speech.

A series of exercises to develop sampling techniques is presented in the appendix to this paper. Supplementary exercises to practice recognizing stressed words, following this format, can be developed for any commercially available tapes using natural discourse. Tapes which use scripted and read discourse are usually not good for this kind of practice because by scripting it first and then reading it on tape, the natural pattern of stress is altered. Usually more words are stressed and words are articulated more carefully than normal.

Exercises can also be developed to practice making predictions after some cues have been sampled. Before listening to a lecture, students can predict the lecture topic in general terms. After listening to the introduction of the lecture, however, students can predict the content and organization of

the lecture much more specifically. Practice can^{also}/be done with short segments of discourse using words like "however" and "furthermore." Students hear the first part of the discourse up to the word "however", the tape is stopped, and they predict what the speaker will say next. Then they listen to the tape to check their prediction.

When teachers create their own tapes and exercises, they can devise them with the listening process and selective listening strategies in mind. When using commercially prepared ESL listening texts and tapes, it is often necessary to adapt the procedures for using the exercises as well as the exercises themselves. One example of this is a listening cloze-dictation exercise found in a recently published ESL text using natural tapes. In this exercise, every 5th word has been deleted. This results in omitting some unstressed, often totally obscured words which carry little or no meaning in the discourse. Students (and teachers as well) have difficulty actually hearing these obscured words. The directions to the exercise say simply "Listen as many times as you need to." This implies that students should attempt to and be able to understand every word on the tape. It would be better to ask students first to predict what they expect to hear in the blank and then to check while they listen. Even better, the exercise should be rewritten, leaving blanks for the stressed words. Now students are practicing sampling - a valuable selective listening strategy.

Listening for Acquisition

The preceding part of this paper is an attempt to describe a rationale and methodology for developing listening for comprehension

of natural discourse first in an ESL language program. It is the hypothesis of Krashen, Winitz, and others that if students are first able to comprehend messages that are relevant to them, and if the level of language is slightly beyond their own, they will also acquire some of the language forms in the message. The selective listening strategies of predicting and sampling are designed to help students cope with natural authentic English discourse. I believe, however, that they are also applicable and beneficial in developing listening abilities for language acquisition as well.

Implications for methodology and materials development

Krashen (1981) has said that the "optimal" kind of input for acquisition ("intake") is natural (i.e. communicative), interesting (i.e. relevant to the student), comprehensible, and near an $i+1$ level (where i is the current level of acquisition of the student.) For input to be meaningful and relevant to our particular students, we will always have to supplement the textbooks we are using to make our own tapes about our school and city, the local people, updated news broadcasts and TV programs, current songs. The topics and situations we choose will depend on our students and their needs and interests.⁷

⁷Krahnke (1982) recommends developing projects around the interests and needs of our students. In this way, the natural language generated in the information-gathering and problem solving stages of the project serves as meaningful and relevant input.

In an attempt to make the input we use more comprehensible for our students, we can do two things: (1) we can sequence our natural, authentic tapes from "easier (with respect to content, vocabulary, situation, structures, level of concreteness) to "more difficult" (Underwood, 1976, 1979) and (2) we may simplify the discourse we use on tape to bring it closer to what we roughly determine to be the general vicinity of the $i+1$ level for our students. We can simplify it by making it more redundant (Kisslinger and Rost, 1980) or by making it simpler in syntax. For both kinds of input, we can increase comprehensibility by providing an extra-linguistic context for the tape with pictures, realia, videotape, etc.

The kinds of exercises that we could use to develop listening for acquisition would include traditional exercises like dictations and cloze exercises, which focus on all the words that are said. However, there would be a change in the traditional focus of the exercise being only on the form of the message. A typical exercise would focus first on understanding the message (through use of the listening strategies described above), and then on attending to the language forms of the message. An example of this kind of exercise can be found in the Appendix to this paper. In addition, the articles in Winitz (1981) offer many practical suggestions for developing listening exercises for language acquisition.

This paper has been an attempt to clarify the two purposes for developing listening comprehension in an ESL instructional program. Comprehension should come first, but a complete program should also develop acquisition. By helping our students use

selective listening strategies, we can hasten their ability to comprehend and cope with the natural language they meet outside the classroom, as well as their ability to learn the language.

APPENDIX

Exercise Series 1: Exercises to practice sampling for stressed words

(Note: These exercises were for advanced-level students in an American Studies ESL course. They could be adapted for any level of student or topic.)

STUDENT WORKSHEET: The Today Show, NBC, August 27, 1980

Introduction to stressed words in discourse

Part 1A: Listen to this news broadcast on the tape. Read the script below. Notice how the underlined words on the script sound.

1 Lots of people get tired of the old routine, 9 to 5, rush hour
2 twice a day, week in and week out. With that in mind, the city of
3 Los Angeles is offering its employees some flexibility in their work
4 schedules as Roy Neal reports:

5 "Something new's been added to the early-morning freeway traffic
6 of Los Angeles: 'flextime', a flexible work day on an experimental
7 basis for city employees that finds lots of them going to work very
8 early. They can check in any time between six-thirty and nine-thirty
9 in the morning."

Part 1B: Listen to the tape and read along with the script. Underline the words that sound stressed to you. Stressed words usually sound louder, longer, and at a higher pitch than other words. (The teacher will repeat this part of the tape several times.)

1 Most of the employees have chosen the 9-80 plan. They work 80
2 hours in 9 days. That gives them an extra day off every two weeks
3 and the workers don't have to put in too many hours in any one day-
4 eight 9-hour shifts and one of 8 hours. And the people say that by
5 coming in half an hour early and shortening the lunch hour, it's almost
6 the same as the kind of day they worked before the plan. It's a lot
7 easier than a 10-hour day, 4-day week, also proposed. Almost without
8 exception, the employees like the 9-80 plan.

Part 1C: Listen to the tape and write down what you think are the "most important" or "key" words in this part.

(Students hear the part of the tape transcribed in part 1D, but take notes initially without seeing the script.)

Part 1D: Listen to the tape of this part of the discourse again.
Underline the words that sound stressed to you.

1 Some people get an extra day to spend with their family or
2 take an extended vacation or a long weekend, get needed repairs
3 done on their automobile, have a repairman come to their house,
4 or things which you can't really do on a Saturday or Sunday.

5 The city's personnel manager, John Driscoll, also is enthusiastic.
6 "It has increased productivity, the morale's increased substantially,
7 people do like that extra day off. We think it does reduce the use
8 of automobiles in the downtown sector particularly."

9 The experiment's been so successful that all 37,000 city employees
10 expect to be put on flextime next year.

Part 1E: Now compare the words you underlined in part 4 with the
key words you wrote in part 3. Are they the same?
What kinds of words are usually stressed?

(Teacher discusses with students how the nature of the discourse affects
number of stressed words. In the news, for example, more important infor-
mation is compressed into a short time, so many words are stressed. In
informal conversation, fewer words per unit of time will be stressed.)

Exercise series 2: Exercises focusing first on comprehension of the message
and then on language form

(Note: These were developed for advanced beginning students. They could
be adapted according to student level and tape topic)

STUDENT WORKSHEET: Phone call- airport limosine

Part 2A: You are flying from Cleveland to New York to meet your cousin
who has just arrived. Your plane leaves Cleveland airport Friday at 5:30 p.m.
Since you don't have a car, you need to take a limosine to the airport.

You're calling the limosine service in Akron. What information do you need?

1. _____ (times the limosines leaves and arrives)
2. _____ (places for departure in Akron near the University)
3. _____ (cost of trip)

(Teacher elicits the above information from the students and writes it on
the board. They may suggest other information they want to find out.)

Part 2B: Now listen to the phone call. Write the information you want to know in the space below.

(The teacher plays the tape twice - for this level- and then discusses the information with the students and writes what they say on the board. If students disagree, the teacher writes all suggestions on the board and then students listen to the tape again for the parts they disagree on.)

Part 2C: Look at the information you got in Part 2A. What question can you ask to get this information? Write it here:

Can you think of some other ways to ask for this information?

Now listen to the tape. What did the woman ask? Write her question here:

(Teacher discusses with students the grammaticality of their suggested questions along with the differences in meaning, level of formality, etc. of the student-generated and the taped questions.)

Part 2D: Many times in English words are not pronounced the way they are spelled. Often we reduce (shorten) some words, say them quickly, or we say them in a different way from what you expect.

Listen to these parts of the tape again and write in the blanks the words you hear.

1. Where _____ you _____ leave from in Akron?
2. All you _____ do is be at that Holiday Inn 10 or 15 minutes prior to departure and _____ pick you up there.

(Teacher discusses the meanings of these forms with students if they don't understand. More work on reduced forms can be done with other natural tapes students will listen to or one of the currently available ESL texts on this.)

Script: (For teacher use)

A: Akron Limosine.

B: Hello. Could you tell me when limosines leave for Cleveland Airport?

- A: From Akron?
- B: From Akron.
- A: What time's your flight and what day?
- B: Okay. It's on Friday at 5:30.
- A: At 5:30. Where are you going to leave from in Akron?
- B: Somewhere near the U? I don't know where you stop.
- A: Uh-huh, all right. How about Grant Street Holiday Inn?
- B: Grant Street Holiday Inn, okay.
- A: Now there's a car leaving there at 2:40 and that car arrives at Hopkins Airport at 3:55. There is another one 3:55 but that one arrives at 5:10. (hmm) You're playing it close.
- B: Right, right.
- A: So I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt and telling you it's at 2:40 (okay) And the cost is \$8.75.
- B: \$8.75.
- A: All you have to do is be at that Holiday Inn 10 or 15 min/minutes prior to departure and they'll pick you up over there.
- B: Okay. Thank you.

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